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ABSTRACT

Community Volunteers as Companion-Therapists to Children : A Program Evaluation

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A school district supported program which provides children with volunteer companion-therapists was evaluated using self-perception reports, behavior ratings by parents and teachers, and the opinions of parents and volunteers. Program children reported consistent self-perceptions while comparison children dipped slightly. Positive changes in self-perception suggest an optimal visiting frequency of less than once per week with the children assigned to college volunteers making the most improvement. Improvement was also found to have an inverse relationship with age as the older children became more negative over the year. All sections of the community support the program with the participants' mothers being the most enthusiastic.

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SUMMARY

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I. Objectives

This paper describes an attempt to determine the amount of success which the Eugene Citizen Helper Program was having in achieving its goals. Loosely defined, these goals were to ensure that a child would show a marked improvement in social adjustment, cultural enrichment, and academic orientation as the result of having participated in the program. This ancillary school program operates to serve those children who are identified by elementary school counselors as needing the stimulation which the companionship of a volunteer would provide. Most of the children who are identified either come from single-parent homes or for some other reason receive very little supportive attention at home.

This study sought to ascertain any change in the children's self-perceptions or behavior descriptions provided by their teachers and parents. Using these and other data, an attempt was made to locate those factors which were most closely related to behavior and self-perception change in the participants. Such a design was adequate for gauging any changes in variables measured which were observable to the informants. In order to be more comprehensive, however, use was also made of personal conversations to probe the affective reactions of parents and volunteers to the program and their opinions of the impact that it was having on their lives.

II. Theoretical Framework

The evaluation was based on a broad structure which involves: 1. A description of the program and its participants; 2. An interpretation of the program's goals in terms of measurable phenomena;

3. The comparing of the children in the program with those in the comparison group; 4. The demonstration of relations between variables where change occured; and 5. A description of the reactions of parents and volunteers to the program.

Data collection was in two parts and to large extent this determines the presentation of the effects of the program. Statistically treated data were used to show the relative effect of children having had or of not having had a volunteer as a therapist-companion. In addition, an anthropological approach to collecting information was used to enable a more sensitive tool to respond to previously unsuspected effects which may have been occuring.

III. Methods

A pre-post design was used for the major part of the statistical data. A modified version of the Davidson-Lang Self-Perception Checklist was administered to small groups of students at both pre- and post-testing periods and was considered to be an indication of change in positive/negative self-perception.

Teachers and parents completed the Becker Behavior Rating Scale, a semantic differential, in rating the behavior of the children as they saw it. Teachers made ratings at both pre and post periods but parents did so only once during the year. Data on both the checklist and the rating scale were gathered for all subjects from both the program and the comparison groups.

Volunteers provided data by reporting the incidence and length of visits with their child for each week during the year. They also contributed by having sequential conversations with an investigator so that he could come to see the program from their point of view.

Parents of all children completed Becker Scale ratings of their child's behavior and gave their opinions and reactions to all aspects of the program as they knew it.

IV. Data Sources

The final sample of subjects totalled 56 children, 27 in the program group and 29 in the comparison group. Selection of the experimental program group subjects was made on the basis of their having been newly matched with a volunteer that year. Comparison group subjects were selected by the school counselors for closeness of match with the program children on all those traits which were used to identify children for the program. In essence the comparison group was made up of program referrals who had not been matched with a volunteer by the time that the final data were collected

Volunteers were either students attending one of the local colleges or were other interested young adults from the community. Classroom teachers provided behavior observation data at the two collection periods. Home behavior data was solicited from both parents

wherever possible. In the data analysis, however, only ratings by mothers were used since very few fathers had been available.

V. Results

Very briefly, the results are these:

1. The Program has been operated by the school district for the past eight years. It employs a program coordinator, a secretary, and four part-time coordinating persons but relies on volunteers from the community for the majority of its people. After a child has been referred to the program there is usually a waiting period before a "match" is made. Persons volunteering to become companion-therapists are carefully screened and given training that is in itself a commitment screening technique. Once a "match" has been made the volunteer is free to do as he wants provided that he makes fairly regular visits and checks with the program periodically.

2. Teacher Ratings: Children in the program group were seen as having more conduct problems than those in the comparison group, as well as deteriorating to a greater extent over the year. These differences were not significant. However teacher ratings showed a a high degree of constancy from the beginning to the end of the year (rho = .80).

3. Parent Ratings: Parents' observations of their children's conduct problems were closely related to the same observations made by the children's teachers (rho = .41 and .43, $p < .05$). Parent ratings also had a moderate relationship with their children's self-perceptions at the beginning of the year (rho = .30).

4. Children's Self-Perceptions: The program group showed a remarkable degree of consistency in reporting their self-perceptions with the mean quotients being exactly the same at the post-test as the pre-test. The comparison group perceived themselves slightly more negatively at the end of the year than they had on the pre-test.

Those children who had been matched with volunteers from local campuses succeeded in raising their self-perception scores to a much higher degree than children who had been matched with non-college volunteers [$t = 2.81$ (17,8), $p < .05$]. However, this finding appears to be somewhat confounded with the evidence that college volunteers made visits less frequently and for longer durations than did non-college volunteers.

The youngest children had the greatest positive change in self-perception, the chance of which decreased progressively up through the grades until the fifth and sixth graders showed mainly negative changes.

5. Volunteer Reactions: Volunteers expressed the opinion that their role as companion-therapist benefitted greatly from their freedom to operate independently with their child but with the program coordinator always being available when they needed him. They expressed the need for a strong commitment to their role and to the welfare of their youngster as being of the utmost importance in maintaining a successful relationship with a child.

6. Parent Reactions: Parents were unreservedly enthusiastic about their support for the program and the individual volunteers who had been working with their children. It was generally thought that the program helps enrich a child's experiences and to make him feel wanted. Parents stated that for their child to make the simple realization that they are an important person to someone from outside the home brightens up their entire outlook on life.

VI. Educational Importance of the Study

One salient aspect that makes this study quite important is that it represents an attempt by the school district to find out as much as it could about the effect of a program that had been in existence for several years. Previously there was very little information on this program which could be examined to enable educators, board members, program administrators and taxpayers to reach more than an educated guess about the effects of the program.

Not only do the results of the study justify the program's existence in the school district but they also brought to light the presence of relationships which can have an important influence on the selection and training of volunteers in future years. It is also very encouraging to note the consistency of the children's self-perceptions which differs with the characteristic negative self-perceptions of delinquent populations.